



HEALTHY CARIBBEAN COALITION

# HCC OPEN LETTER TO CARICOM HEADS OF GOVERNMENT

AT THE 38TH REGULAR MEETING OF THE CONFERENCE OF HEADS OF GOVERNMENT  
JULY 4-6, 2017, ST. GEORGES, GRENADA

June 30, 2017

Dear Honourable Heads of *Government of CARICOM*,

In this, the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of the landmark Port of Spain Declaration (POSD) on NCDs, the members of the Healthy Caribbean Coalition (HCC), Board of Directors, staff and volunteers, call on you, the leadership of the 15 member states and 5 associate member states of CARICOM to **reaffirm your collective commitment to addressing the epidemic of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) in the Caribbean.**

The HCC, born out of the 2007 Port of Spain meeting, is a regional alliance of NCD focussed civil society organisations (CSOs), representing over 120 health and non-health CSOs in the region. We advocate for NCD programmes and policies across the region in partnership with CSOs, PAHO, CARPHA and CARICOM.

10 years ago, in an unprecedented event, Heads of Government of CARICOM acknowledged the urgency of chronic diseases as a development issue and called on each other to launch an impressive regional response defined by the 15 mandates and 27 commitments of the POSD. A catalytic effect followed leading to the global acknowledgement of the seriousness of the issue and the first ever UN high-level meeting on NCDs in 2011.

Fast forward to 2017. NCDs remain the leading cause of mortality and are now responsible for 40% of premature deaths in those under 70 years. They consume national health budgets at a rapid rate, as government efforts are largely focussed on secondary and tertiary treatment. Diabetes prevalence in our region is twice the global prevalence and our amputation rates are astronomical. Tobacco smoking amongst 13-15 year olds in the Caribbean is the highest in the Americas; alcohol continues to pose significant challenges with no solution in sight due to lack of political currency; physical activity levels are low; and we have some of the highest rates of adult and childhood obesity in the world. We have lost our food sovereignty as importers of up to 80 percent of the foods we consume. Our regional food systems are in dire need of restructuring to favour local sustainable production of healthy options and decreased consumption of highly processed energy dense nutrient poor imports.

The upcoming Heads of Government meeting will serve as an opportunity to assess regional NCD progress since 2007 and chart the way forward; committing to an ambitious agenda of accelerated NCD action, and placing us on a trajectory which brings countries closer to achieving the 25\*25 Global NCD targets and indicator 3.4 of the Sustainable Development Agenda.

The HCC supports a whole of society, multisectoral approach to NCD prevention and control and thus wholly commits to assisting our partners in the public sector and the private sector to achieve short- and longer-term NCD targets. Having recently completed HCC's 2017-2021 Strategic Plan, we have identified 3 key priorities and we call on you, our region's leaders, to support action across these key areas. Our call for action is supported and echoed by regional partners including PAHO, CARPHA, and CARICOM. Priority areas are as follows:

1. **Childhood obesity:** Policies which halt/reverse adult and childhood obesity. These include:
  - a. Taxation on sugar-sweetened beverages and other unhealthy foods.
  - b. The banning of the sale and marketing of unhealthy foods in and around schools.
  - c. The banning of marketing of unhealthy foods to children and adolescents.
  - d. Regulation for mandatory front of pack labelling of packaged foods.
2. **Tobacco control:** Implementation of the Articles of the FCTC to which all Caribbean countries (except Haiti) are signatories.
3. **Multisectoral action:** Support at the level of the Head of State for the strengthening and/or establishment of National NCD Commissions or their equivalents to support the multisectoral response to NCDs.

The upcoming meeting of Heads of Government of CARICOM in Grenada, is a singular opportunity for our region's leaders to respond to the call of the people of the region and recommit to another 'decade of action with a difference' - in which the region continues to trail blaze and asserts itself as a leader in achieving the 25\*25 targets and the 2030 NCD targets. The 2018 UNHLM will provide a global stage to announce this commitment and the 12 months leading up to it, the opportunity to demonstrate this commitment through an increased momentum in NCD policy and programming – particularly as it relates to regulation in the area of nutrition policy (SSB taxation) and tobacco control.

Should you take this bold step, we, Caribbean civil society, pledge our support and partnership.



*Maisha Hutton, Executive Director, on behalf of the President, Directors and Members of the Healthy Caribbean Coalition*